

## Inside Higher Ed

### Reaching ‘New Majority’ Students

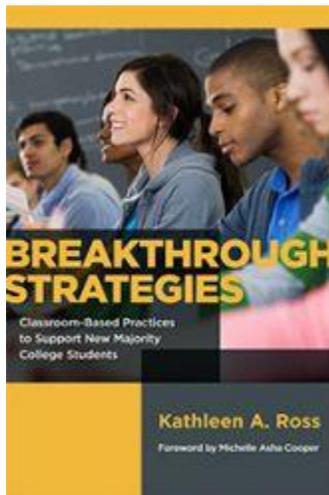
New book explores different classroom strategies for teaching first-generation, underrepresented students.

By

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1 COMMENT



College students today are increasingly different from those of previous generations. They are less likely to be white and more likely to be the first in their families to go to college. Professors who would like to guide these first-generation college students in adjusting to higher education may come across their own challenges. Communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds can become a barrier unto itself.

In her new book, *Breakthrough Strategies: Classroom-Based Practices to Support New Majority Students* (Harvard Education Press), Sister Kathleen Ross, director of the Institute of Student Identity and Success at Heritage University and founding president of the university, outlines various approaches for professors to connect with and teach first-generation, underrepresented students -- or “new majority students,” as Ross calls them.

These strategies cover the gamut, from introducing the students to unfamiliar college concepts on day one (such as defining “syllabus”) to thinking about the

classroom as a community where students help each other rather than attempt to parade their individual successes. Ross conducted her research at Heritage, a small university in rural Washington that enrolls many minority students, as well as Yakima Valley Community College in Washington and Holy Names University in California.

Ross answered questions about her book by email. Her comments have been lightly edited for clarity.

**Q: Your book centers on strategies to support “new majority” students. How do you define such students?**

**A:** I use “new majority” to refer to students coming from non-college-going families, most of whom are low income. The main reason this group of students is becoming a larger percentage of the college-aged population -- and will probably become the majority within the next 10 years -- is simply that they are from the families who have been having more children during the past 20-plus years than the families where college going has been a part of their lives for the past 20-plus years. Consequently, the cohort of college-aged persons nationally contains a larger percentage of first-generation college students than 25 years ago. The growing proportion of the population from first- or second-generation immigrant families is also part of the explanation.

**Q: Many of the experiences that you write about are based on your research at Heritage University, a liberal arts university that serves about 1,200 students, most of them nontraditional. How do the challenges of new majority students attending larger, more traditional universities differ from those at your institution?**

**A:** The ways in which the challenges are the same in both types of institutions are based on the reality that virtually all four-year institutions of higher education have a dominant way of doing things and interacting on a day-to-day basis that could be called “the culture of academia.” It is this reality that is an especially challenging mystery to be deciphered and adapted to by first-generation-to-college students. New majority students attending larger, more traditional universities probably often find this challenge more problematic, because they have fewer fellow students facing the same conundrums to help them understand and adapt.

They also are less apt to comment on or ask about these barriers because they don't want to be seen as "dumb" and they have observed other students dealing with these situations as if they were not a problem. The dropout rates for first-generation students are significantly higher than those of continuing-generation students who have the same entering aptitude scores and grades, which is at least partially due to not learning to adapt to the culture of academia. This problem would seem to be more problematic in an institution where the first-generation student population is a smaller percentage of the student body (say, under 25 percent).

**Q: You discuss several strategies for professors to connect with nontraditional students, but many of your examples involving group work and class discussion assume that the professor is teaching relatively small classes. Can professors with large classes (more than 100 students) incorporate these strategies, and if so, how might they approach the strategies differently?**

**A:** Larger classes can still experience most of the strategies, if the professor uses a little creativity in adapting the ideas to a larger class setting. Most of the adaptations involve developing a way for small groups to work with each other, and these can be set up even within larger classrooms with immovable rows of seats by having four or five students who are sitting near one another form a group. The professor can have those groups report back in some creative way that keeps everyone involved (like randomly calling on groups in different parts of the room so they don't know who will be called on next, or having a group indicate their group response in a simple format on a piece of paper large enough to be read across the room and held up by a group member, or other creative ways to increase active involvement during the class).

**Q: The majority of your book outlines various strategies and tactics for faculty members. What changes should be made at the institutional level to support new majority students? In other words, what policies should be put into place by administrators?**

**A:** My work has focused on what professors and teaching assistants should do within the classroom, because there are a number of books, articles and other resources already available that address issues at the university administration

level (including financial aid, tutoring and academic skills centers, faculty development and support services, learning communities, involving families in campus activities wherever possible, etc.). There are many fewer resources available that suggest what faculty across the campus can do inside their classrooms to help new majority students, which is why I am focused on this work.

**Q: Since Heritage has a large Hispanic and Native American population, you write about how these students tend to value community above their own success, and how they revere elders. Every culture has different behaviors and traditions, and students growing up in similar cultures have different learned behaviors from their families, too. How can professors identify all of these nuanced cultural differences in their students?**

**A:** This is a very important question. If a university has a center for teaching excellence that focuses on providing faculty assistance, I would encourage faculty to ask them to help answer the question you pose for their institution. The center can conduct some informal practical research among students to find answers to questions such as “What motivates you to continue in your college studies, even when it gets hard?” Or “What do your parents and grandparents say about you attending college?” Or “What have you found the hardest to adjust to in college?” Or “What are the two things that have surprised you the most in being a student at college?”

By analyzing the answers to questions like these, the significant characteristics of the home cultures of students will begin to emerge. Also, an individual faculty member could conduct this same kind of research by asking students to answer these or similar questions, individually or in groups or via email to the professor, or by posing these questions for students to answer in the journaling assigned as part of a class. If several faculty members gather this information from their classes, they can then share the results with each other and together begin to get a better picture of the attitudes and values that motivate their students and shape their expectations of classroom experiences.

**Q: Heritage students are all commuter; none live on campus. But campus living is a big part of students' lives at other colleges and universities.**

**What challenges do new majority students face by living away from home for the first time, and what can institutions do to help this transition?**

**A:** This could be the subject of an entirely new research project and book! In general, the approach would need to be one that devotes significant attention to observing when resident students are distressed or not functioning well, finding ways to bring them together in support groups with experienced counselors or older peer support students, and listening carefully to learn what is at the basis of the problems resident students are experiencing. Assistance is most effective when it flows directly from a clear understanding of what and where the distress is coming from for students. Asking probing questions in a very supportive way is a key skill needed by staff who are trying to deal with problems of first-generation resident students who are on the verge of dropping out.

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/12/07/qa-author-book-strategies-teaching-new-majority-students?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=101f9b37a9-DNU20161207&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-101f9b37a9-197624053&mc\\_cid=101f9b37a9&mc\\_eid=a9b5d9c865](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/12/07/qa-author-book-strategies-teaching-new-majority-students?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=101f9b37a9-DNU20161207&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-101f9b37a9-197624053&mc_cid=101f9b37a9&mc_eid=a9b5d9c865)